

# A MINISTRY FOR HUNGRY SAINTS

UNDER THE EXALTED CHRIST, THE GOSPEL BEGINS TO SPREAD

# THE ACTS

† THE BOOK OF ACTS

# OF THE APOSTLES

*An overview of the Book of Acts, by Given O. Blakely*

## ACTS 5:31-32

*"Him hath God exalted with His right hand to be a Prince and a Savior, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. And we are His witnesses of these things; and so is also the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that obey Him."*

"Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved." (Acts 4:12)

## Lesson #35

### COMMENTARY ON: 8:1-4

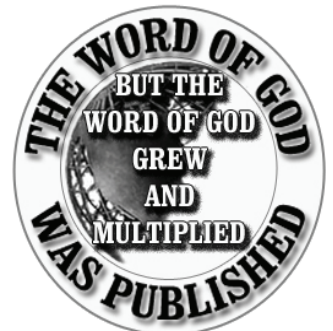
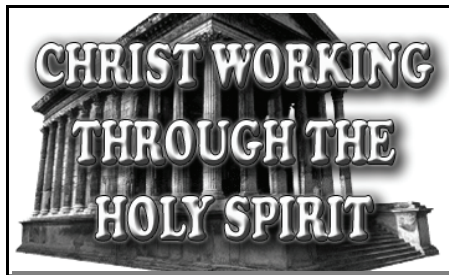
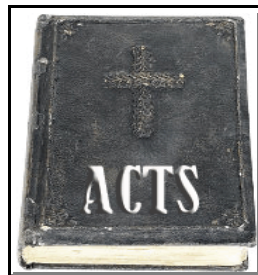
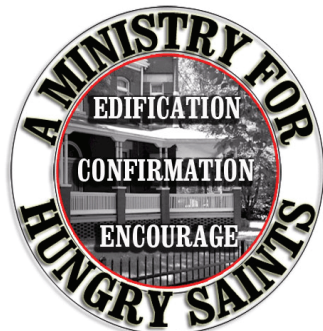
#### PERSECUTION AND SCATTERING

With the stoning of Stephen the circumstance and environment of the early church were changed. In a sense, this was a kind of catalyst, designed by Satan to destroy the body of Christ, but used by God to promote an even more extensive preaching of the Gospel. The enemies of the faith, who sought to subdue the preaching of the Gospel, ended up causing it to be spread by even more proclaimers than those with whom they first contended. The "great persecution" that was launched against the church managed to purge Jerusalem of multitudes of believers. Apparently those who had gathered there "out of every nation under heaven," now returned to their homelands. This time, however, they went back with a fire burning in their bones, as the Word of God was effectively working within them. Consequently, "they that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the Word." Simultaneously, the young man Saul, who had kept the garments of the false witnesses as they stoned Stephen, "Made havoc of the church, entering every house" and imprisoning the believers.

## ACTS 17:26-27

*"And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation; that they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after Him, and find Him, though He be not far from every one of us."*

"... and ye shall be witnesses unto Me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

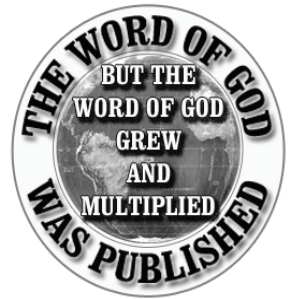


Since May, 1993, a ministry instituted for the encouragement of believers in Christ



## The Book of Acts

### Lesson Number 35



A MINISTRY INITIATED IN MAY 1993, AND DEDICATED TO STRENGTHENING THOSE WHO ARE IN CHRIST, BY BUILDING THEIR FAITH, ENHANCING THEIR JOY, AND STABILIZING THEIR HOPE, ENABLING THEM TO WORK OUT THEIR SALVATION WITH FEAR AND TREMBLING.

**TRANSLATION LEGEND:** ALT = Analytical-Literal Translation (2005), AMPLIFIED = Amplified Bible (1965), ASV = American Standard Version (1901), BBE=Bible in Basic English (1949), DRA = Douay-Rheims (1899), ERV = English Revised Version (1885), ESV = English Stand Version (2001), GNB = Good News (1966), GWN = God's Word (1995), IE = International English, ISV = International Standard Version (1967), JPS = Jewish Publication Society (1917), KJV = King James Version (1611), L.ITV = Literal Translation of the Bible ((1976), LIVING = Living Bible (1971), MKJV = Modern KJV (1962), MONTGOMERY = Montgomery's New Testament (2001), MRD = Peshitta-James Murdock Translation (1852), NAB = New American Bible (2002), NASB = New American Standard Bible (1977), NAU = New American Standard Bible (1995), NIB = New International Bible, NIV = New International Version (1984), NJB = New Jerusalem Bible (1985), NKJV = New King James Version (1979), NLT =New Living Translation (1996), NRSV = New Revised Standard Version (1989), PHILLIPS = J B Phillips New Testament (1962), PNT = BISHOP'S New Testament (1595), RSV = Revised Standard Version (1952), TNK = JPS Tanakj (1985), Webster = The Webster Bible (1833),WEYMOUTH = Weymouth's New Testament (1903), WILLIAMS = William's New Testament (1937), TYNDALE = Tyndale's Bible (1526), WYCLIFFE = Wycliffe New Testament (1382), YLT =Young's Literal Translation (1862).

----- Lexicon and Bible Translation Codes with Identification -----

**LEXICON LEGEND:** FRIEBERG = Friberg Lexicon, UBS = UBS Lexicon, LOUW-NIDA = Louw-Nida Lexicon, LIDDELL SCOTT = Liddell Scott Lexicon, THAYER = Thayer's Greek Lexicon, LEH = LEH Lexicon, GINGRICH = Gingrich Lexicon

THE INSPIRED RECORD OF HOW THE ENTHRONED CHRIST, BY MEANS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT, WORKED THROUGH HIS HOLY APOSTLES AND GODLY MEN, TO SPREAD THE WORD OF THE GOSPEL THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE WORLD, AND TO BRING EDIFICATION AND STABILITY TO MEMBERS OF CHRIST'S BODY.

DISCLAIMER: The quoting of other translations is not to be taken as a condoning of them. My purpose is rather to show the remarkable diversity, and sometimes outright contradictions that exist among these various versions of Scripture. Our understanding of the Word of God ultimately depends upon our comprehension of the Lord Himself and His eternal purpose. Where this understanding is not present, we are shut up to scholasticism and conjecture, both of which are of the world, not of God.

# PERSECUTION and SCATTERING

“ 8:1 And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles. <sup>2</sup> And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him. <sup>3</sup> As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison. <sup>4</sup> Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word.” (Acts 8:1-4)

## INTRODUCTION

With the stoning of Stephen the circumstance and environment of the early church were changed. In a sense, this was a kind of catalyst, designed by Satan to destroy the body of Christ, but used by God to promote an even more extensive preaching of the Gospel.

It is imperative that we remain aware of the fact that “*the heavens do rule*” (Dan 4:26), “*the Kingdom is the Lord's*,” and that God is “*the Governor among the nations*” (Psa 22:28). Jesus taught us to recognize this in all of our

prayers: “*For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen*” (Matt 6:13). This is precisely why we not only ask for our daily bread, but also that we would not be led into temptation, and that we would be delivered from the evil one. If these things are not realized, Satanic initiatives like those of our text will throw us into confusion and cause our hearts to faint. It was Job's understanding of God that sustained him during His trial, even though he did not comprehend the trial itself. I am becoming increasingly aware of the rarity

of such an understanding in our time – even among the professed church. The utter irony of the situation is that this is the day when God has revealed the most about Himself through Jesus Christ. It is further declared that the hallmark of the New Covenant is that “they shall all know Me” (Jer 31:34; Heb 8:11). Notwithstanding this strong affirmation, we are faced with a professing church that has a remarkable ignorance of God – the very antithesis of promise of God. If it is true that God “*cannot lie*,” then we have a lying church on our hands. Its

## CONTENTS

- SAUL WAS CONSENTING TO HIS DEATH (8:1a)
- A GREAT PERSECUTION AGAINST THE CHURCH (8:1b)
- THEY WERE ALL SCATTERED (8:8c)
- EXCEPT THE APOSTLES (8:1d)
- DEVOUT MEN BURY STEPHEN (8:2)
- AS FOR SAUL (8:3)
- THEY WENT EVERYWHERE PREACHING THE WORD (8:4)
- CONCLUSION

perpetual need for counseling and problem resolution, together with its abysmal ignorance of both the Person and the will of God, betrays its real condition. These things are not marks of the people of God. In the language of Scripture, *“They have corrupted themselves, their spot is not the spot of His children: they are a perverse and crooked generation”* (Deut 32:5).

The text before us confirms that godliness does not necessarily insulate us from the aggression of our enemies – even though God can make even our enemies to be at peace with us (Prov 16:7). Notwithstanding, we must not philosophize on the matter as though that was a promise. There are times when, in the mind of the Lord, it is not appropriate to cause our enemies to be at peace with us. While this ought to be so apparent that there is no need to say it, yet the church is being deluged with a soft and pliable theology that leads them away from such a conclusion.

The Lord has extended Himself to clarify the nature of the life of faith – that it often includes oppression from the ungodly. The case of Cain and Abel clarifies this to our hearts (Gen 4:8). Then there is Joseph and his brothers (Gen 37:4-5), Moses and the people he led (Ex 15:24; Num 26:9), David and Saul (1 Sam 23:25), the prophets and the people to whom they ministered (Matt 5:12), John the Baptist (Matt 14:10), the apostles (Acts 5:18; 1 Thess 2:14-15), and

the Lord Jesus Himself (Matt 16:21). There is no reason for any informed believer to be confused by opposition, or by the aggressiveness and even seeming success of the enemies of the faith. There is altogether too much naivety in the church of our day on this matter.

In our text, the enemies of the faith, who sought to subdue the preaching of the Gospel, ended up causing it to be spread by even more proclaimers than those with whom they first contended. This was another evidence of the Lord’s management of the affairs of men. There is no possible way that our *“adversary the devil”* would consent to the spreading of the Word of God – particularly the Gospel of Jesus Christ, who had already bruised his head. In fact, his efforts were calculated to stop the Word from being preached. Yet, behold what his efforts so! They rather cause an extensive spread of the very word he was trying to subdue. I say the devil is the one who was ultimately frustrated, because he was the one animating the persecutors. Because they had rejected the Lord’s Christ, it is as though God handed them over to the devil to assist him in his diabolical work.

The *“great persecution”* that was launched against the church managed to purge Jerusalem of multitudes of believers. Initially, that no doubt brought great relief to the Jewish council, for they were totally incapable of controlling those who had bene preaching. They had commanded them to speak no longer in the name of Jesus. They had sequestered them, and even beaten them. They had exerted all of their ecclesiastical authority, but it was all to no avail. Now, they had even publically murdered one of the key proclaimers. Additionally a fierce and intrusive persecution will be unleashed against the church. Surely

this will at last rid them of these aggressive proclaimers. And, indeed, if Jesus was not ruling from the right hand of God, this may very well have been the case. However, he had been exalted, was on the throne, and was governing the affairs of men. Therefore, what they do will ultimately contribute to his purpose, not theirs.

In the scattering of the believers, apparently those who had gathered there *“out of every nation under heaven,”* now returned to their homelands or regions. This time, however, they went back with a fire burning in their bones, as the Word of God was effectively working within them. As it is written of that Word, *“as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe”* (1 Th 2:13). Consequently, *“they that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the Word.”*

Simultaneously, the young man Saul, who had kept the garments of the false witnesses as they stoned Stephen, *“made havoc of the church, entering every house”* and imprisoning the believers. However, he will not long remain in this posture.

### SOMETHING THAT MUST BE SEEN

This is the real church in action – the body of Christ in whom He was living and active. These were people who had bene reconciled to God, and who, as a group, were not being draw aside by competing interests. They were really walking in *“newness of life,”* not just talking about it. At this point, divisive doctrines had not yet arisen, although they would come in due time.

#### How the Church Handled Popularity

We see it in see how it handles popularity – for in the beginning the church had *“favor with all the people”*

**Yet, this body of people did not modify their message or change their spiritual stance. They made no special effort to please the people, and did not concoct a special message or methodology to reach more people.**

(Acts 2:47), and “the people magnified them”(Acts 5:12). Yet, this body of people did not modify their message or change their spiritual stance. They made no special effort to please the people, and did not concoct a special message or methodology to reach more people. It was their pure devotion and faithfulness to the Lord that became the means of reaching the people – people who had known many of them, and had witnessed the obvious change in them. We are even told of the activities in which they were involved: “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers” (Acts 2:42). Notice the total absence of the kinds of activities in which the

been exhorted to be the salt of the earth, to seek to *win others*, or to reach out to the community. The reason for this glaring absence ought to be obvious. **It is the nature of spiritual life to pervade the environment in which it is found** (Matt 13:33). Wherever holy influences are not spreading, it is only because there is with no spiritual life at all, or it is being stifled by competitive influences.

The prominence of unbelief within the professing church is confirmed by its inveterate tendency to rely upon the wisdom of men. It is trying to duplicate the life the first church by rote, and that is something is simply cannot be done.

#### The Response of the Church to Its

**This is a church that will not be turned from the Lord – not even by aggressive persecution. Quite to the contrary, it continues aggressive in its stance, earnestly in quest for a heavenly country, and a city whose Builder and Maker is God.**

nominal church involves itself.

This is now the third glorious confirmation that the Gospel is basically compelling. If ever the true message is delivered by those who are themselves holy, there is something about it that tugs at the hearts of the people. John the Baptist experienced great popularity among the seeking and devout (Matt 3:5; Mk 1:5). The Lord Jesus attracted multitudes of people as well (Matt 4:25; 8:1,18; 9:36; 12:15; 13:2; 15:30; 19:2; 21:9). Now the Apostles and those who were continuing in their doctrine had done the same thing (Acts 4:21; 5:14-16).

The influence of that early church upon society had nothing whatsoever to do with a strategy developed by men. There is not so much as a single word recorded that indicates believers had

#### Enemies

We also see it responding to its enemies as well as to its Lord. From the very beginning, when it was threatened, the church prayed, seeking boldness from the Lord – and it was granted (Acts 4:24-31). Opposition did not divide those early brethren. Instead, it is said of them during that time, “And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common” (Acts 4:32). When they were told not to preach, they preached anyway (Acts 4:20; 5:25,29,42). Their tenacious and faithful preaching will continue in our text – even though the most aggressive persecution they have ever experienced was launched against them.

This is a church that will not be turned from the Lord – not even by aggressive persecution. Quite to the contrary, it continues aggressive in its stance, earnestly in quest for a heavenly country, and a city whose Builder and Maker is God. There was no special program or series of meetings launched by the church to address these persecutions. This was not a church directed by such activities. It was connected to the Head, having been “joined to the Lord”(1 Cor 6:17), and was holding fast to its Head (Col 2:19).

There is every indication in the Scriptures that God will not bless a church that insists on living far from Jesus. That is precisely why spiritual deadness tends to spread – **because Divine influences have been withdrawn.** It is true that some have invented theologies that affirm that all alone God intended to bring an end any immediate workings within the church. Such men say that this kind of involvement was only intended to launch the church, not to maintain it. If this is the case, it was not announced by the Prophets. That would introduce a circumstance that contradicts express apostolic doctrine. “Having therefore obtained help of God, I continue unto this day, witnessing both to small and great, saying none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come”(Acts 26:22). Rather than declaring the coming of something temporal, the prophets foretold an era that eventually blend with eternity. In the book of Acts, we are witnessing the commencement of that kind of life. It was a life that was strictly managed by the exalted Christ by the Spirit, and through the faith of the members of the body of Christ.

While we are not to expect every detail of this grand book to be duplicated, we are to expect the kind of life that is reported to be among us today.

## SAUL WAS CONSENTING TO HIS DEATH

“<sup>8:1a</sup> And Saul was consenting unto his death.” Other versions read, “in

hearty agreement with putting him to death,” <sup>NASB</sup> “giving approval to his

death,” <sup>NIV</sup> “approved of their killing him,” <sup>NRSV</sup> “gave his approval to his murder,” <sup>CJB</sup>

*“agreed with putting him to death,”*<sup>CSB</sup>  
*“approved of his execution,”*<sup>ESV</sup>  
*“consenting and participating in his death,”*<sup>MRD</sup>  
*“agreed completely with killing him,”*<sup>NET</sup>  
*“had pleasure in his death,”*<sup>TNT</sup>  
*“assenting to his death,”*<sup>YLT</sup>  
*“fully approved of his murder,”*<sup>WEYMOUTH</sup>  
*“[not only] consenting to [Stephen’s] death [he was pleased and entirely approving],”*<sup>AMPLIFIED</sup>  
 and *“was agreeing with them in his murder.”*<sup>EMTV</sup>

When Stephen was being stoned, we are apprized, *“the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man’s feet, whose name was Saul”* (Acts 7:58). Now, the Spirit shines the spotlight upon this circumstance, shedding light upon it. This is an example of the light making a deed known, or manifest. As it is written, *“But all things that are reprov’d are made manifest by the light: for whatsoever doth make manifest is light”* (Eph 5:13).

There is no record of Saul lifting up his voice against Stephen, or casting a single stone at him. It may have appeared to those who were standing by that he was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. The text does not say that this young man volunteered to watch the garments of the witnesses as they stoned Stephen to death. Nor, indeed, do they say that he objected to do so.

More than twenty years later (about 58 A.D.), Paul himself – who was that young man Saul – confessed that this is an exact statement of what was taking place. In fact, he confessed it to the exalted Christ Himself. *“And when the blood of Thy martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by, and consenting unto his death, and kept the raiment of them that slew him”* (Acts 22:20). His involvement was no doubt a cause for the goading of his conscience for some time after that. Jesus confronted him with the fact that it had been difficult for him to deal with the goading of his conscience (Acts 9:5).

**WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO “CONSENT”?**

What does it mean to *“consent”* to a thing? Certainly, it must be an important response, for a special note is made of it by the Holy Spirit. The lexical meaning of *“consenting”* is, “to be pleased

together with, to approve together (with others): absolutely . . . agree to,”<sup>THAYER</sup> “strictly approve along with another . . . be willing to, agree to,”<sup>FRIBERG</sup> “to decide with someone else that something is preferable or good – to agree to, to consent to.”<sup>LOUW-NIDA</sup>

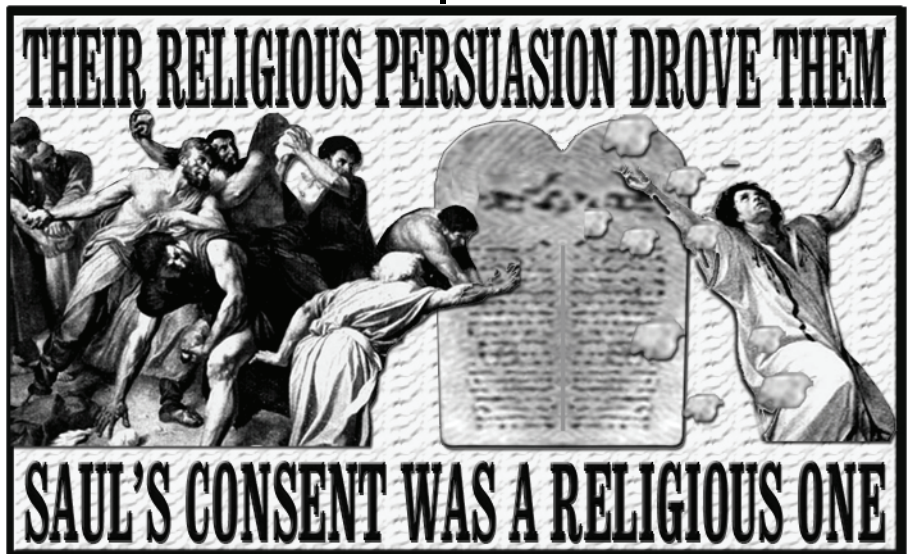
To *“consent”* means to agree with, concur, and approve of the action being witnessed. It means to have the same view of the circumstance as those who are carrying it out. In his *“consent,”* Saul was approving of the stoning of Stephen, affirming that it was the right thing to do. He did this by watching over the garments of the ones who initiated the stoning, doing so according, they thought, to the Law of Moses. Saul’s deed, therefore, was not an innocent gesture. It was not the response of a neutral person. He may not have personally participated in the stoning, but he became one with the individuals who did so. He was participant by consent, approval, and personal sanction.

But there is more to this than the academic view. This stoning was not the expression of, what might be conceived to be, bloodthirsty men. I do not question that these men were not noted for going about and killing people at random. They were not driven by a lust for blood. It was actually their religion that compelled them to stone Stephen, and it was Saul’s religious persuasion that moved him to

individual is actually compelled to act in stark contradiction of the truth. This is because the carnal mind is enmity against God, and can neither think nor act in harmony with the truth. Where a love of the truth – particularly the truth of the Gospel – has not been received, it impacts directly upon a persons thinking and demeanor. Thus the counsels of the heart are unveiled by the illuminating effects of the law.

The men who stoned Stephen, and Paul who heartily consented to their action, were not acting as people who were personally offended by Stephen – although that condition did exist. In their own minds, they were acting as the guardians of their religion. They were ridding themselves an influence they conceived to be defiling and reprehensible. Their delusion actually became the means through which the devil worked, for **he always works within the context of the lie, delusion, and spiritual darkness.**

In this case, delusion consisted of an erroneous view of the Scriptures them selves. I do not doubt that those who stoned Stephen, and Saul, who consented to their action, were convinced they were fulfilling the mandate of the Law of Moses: *“If thy brother, the son of thy mother, or thy son, or thy daughter, or*



consent to it.

When truth is **not** perceived, yet a claim is made to embrace it, the

*the wife of thy bosom, or thy friend, which is as thine own soul, entice thee secretly, saying, Let us go and serve other gods, which thou hast not known,*

*thou, nor thy fathers; Namely, of the gods of the people which are round about you, nigh unto thee, or far off from thee, from the one end of the earth even unto the other end of the earth; Thou shalt not consent unto him, nor hearken unto him; neither shall thine eye pity him, neither shalt thou spare, neither shalt thou conceal him; But thou shalt surely kill him; thine hand shall be first upon him to put him to death, and afterwards the hand of all the people*"(Deut 13:6-8).

How serious is it when **religious** men do not perceive the truth – even though it is within their reach? What can be said of those to whom Divine providence has brought the truth, yet they have declined to receive it? What of those who are familiar with the Scriptures, yet, after long periods of time have not comprehended either their nature or their true message? What is the effect of maintaining a religious posture, yet refusing to submit the soul to the truth of God, or bathe ones mind in the Word of God?

though it is being glossed by many professing Christian leaders in this day. The surface treatment of this condition is the mother of religious compromise. It is what has birthed movements and efforts that have pretended as though not receiving the love of the truth is innocent.

Men are obligated by their very existence to seek after the Lord. As it is written, *"And He made from one [common origin, one source, one blood] all nations of men to settle on the face of the earth, having definitely determined [their] allotted periods of time and the fixed boundaries of their habitation (their settlements, lands, and abodes), So that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after Him and find Him, although He is not far from each one of us"* <sup>AMPLIFIED</sup> (Acts 17:26). Keep in mind that this is the determined pre-gospel posture of men, and it is by Divine intention. To fail to seek God **after** one has been exposed to the Gospel compounds the situation.

**YOUNG SAUL IS AN EXAMPLE**

- ⇨ The devoted manner of his life was known to all Jews from the time of his youth (Acts 26:4).
- ⇨ At some point, Paul testified, *"sin, taking occasion by the commandment, wrought in me all manner of concupiscence"*(Rom 7:7).
- ⇨ Again he testified, *"For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it slew me"* (Rom 7:11).
- ⇨ We are not sure of the precise time when Paul became a Pharisee, but he said of that circumstance that he was *"a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee"* (Acts 23:6). It was no doubt in this capacity, or in anticipation of it, that he was brought up at the feet of Gamaliel.
- ⇨ During his time as a Pharisee, living *"after the most straitest sect of"* the Jew's religion (Acts 26:5), he *"excelled above man"* of his *"equals," "being more exceedingly zealous of the traditions"* of the Jewish fathers (Gal 1:14).

Yet, in our text, this very man is said to be *"consenting"* unto the death of Stephen – **all of his religious training notwithstanding**. Keep in mind that he was brought up at the feet of Gamaliel, who, we are told, had no mind for aggressive opposition to those who taught concerning Jesus (Acts 5:34-39).

**Those dominated by such a mind will oppose the truth, whether by personally throwing stones like the Jewish council, or consenting to the deed like the young man Saul who watched over their garments.**

When such souls are exposed to the real Gospel, and the convicting power of the Holy Spirit, they will become hostile toward God, for that is the nature of *"the carnal mind."* As it is written, *"Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be"*(Rom 8:7). **Those dominated by such a mind will oppose the truth, whether by personally throwing stones like the Jewish council, or consenting to the deed like the young man Saul who watched over their garments.**

One dare not compromise the truth to placate people who have had access to the it, yet have ignored it. That is a circumstance that has always been taken seriously by men of God – even

Paul himself is a case in point. We are not left to conjecture concerning this matter. Paul testifies to his life prior to being justified by faith. Let us allow him to testify to us of his condition during the time of our text.

- ⇨ He was an Israelite by blood: *"of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin"* (Rom 11:1).
- ⇨ He was raised in a devout family, being circumcised on the eighth day according to the law (Phil 3:5).
- ⇨ Although born in Tarsus, a city of Cilicia, he was brought up in Jerusalem *"at the feet of Gamaliel, and taught after the perfect manner of the Law"*(Acts 22:3).

**WHY SAY THESE THINGS?**

I have not said these things to in any way cast aspersions at the apostle Paul, for I have only the highest regard for him. Rather, this confirms to us the nature of the flesh and its hostility toward God. The fact that Saul could continue to live in *"all good conscience"* throughout his life (Acts 23:1), confirms the anesthetizing effects of an improper view of Scripture. It underscores what happens when there is a supposed blend of Scripture with human tradition.

Satan can gain the advantage among supposedly devout people when they are fundamentally ignorant of the revealed purpose of God? Both the Jewish council and young Saul are confirmations of this truth.

The fact that such violent opposition is not presently happening in our country does not negate these facts. Our present safety is only owing to *“the earth”* helping the woman (Rev 12:16). That is, the laws of the land will not allow the bloody attack of the body of Christ. However, the spirit of opposition exists, as *“the mystery of iniquity doth now already work”* (2 Thess 2:7). It is seen in the refusal of the professed church to demand that the word be preached to them. It is confirmed by the rise of frothy and fundamentally flawed views of key doctrines – like justification, the coming of the Lord, and the state of natural men. It is in the wake of religious pretension that a host of godly ministers have been opposed, fired, and even maligned. This is what has caused religious institutes to modify their curriculum to appeal to the passing fads of the day. It is why professed *Christian* men can be in the government, yet speak

in the defense of transgressions like abortion and sodomy. It is why theological eyelids are lifted in skepticism at the report of any group of people who insist on going beyond the perimeter of the mediocre religion of the day.

Today, in our very country, the conditions of Isaiah’s time have surfaced again – only this time they many times worse because of the superiority of the truth that has been vouchsafed to us. Isaiah described the condition in this way: *“Yea, truth faileth; and he that departeth from evil maketh himself a prey: and the LORD saw it, and it displeased Him that there was no judgment”* (Isa 59:15). Truth is failing – not because it has lost any of its inherent power, but because it has been abandoned in preference for fables (1 Tim 1:4; 2 Tim 4:4). As a result, proper and sound judgment has slumped to the

ground as ignoble causes and assessments have been embraced. This is why iniquity is abounding, and, as a consequence, the love of many is waxing cold (Matt 24:12). This is the circumstance that sets the stage for aggressive opposition to the saints of the most high God.

Oh, the seeds of opposition are beginning to grow in our own country. It is a condition that cannot be glossed, any more than the situation that exists in our text. This is nothing less than the flesh waging a relentless war against the Spirit. This not only occurs in individual believers, it also exists within the confines of the church. We do well to be aware of it, and devote ourselves to an aggressive spiritual stance. Opposition like that of our text confirms that we are, in fact, in a war, battling against principalities and powers (Eph 6:12). They are relentless when given leave.

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## A GREAT PERSECUTION AGAINST THE CHURCH

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*“<sup>1b</sup> . . . And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem . . .”*

Opposition continues to escalate. Satan is picking up the pace, becoming more and more aggressive. In other words, the nature of both truth and error are being made known. Truth has moved those who embrace it to be of *“one accord”* (Acts 2:42; 5:12). Those who have believed have been described as *being “of one heart and of one soul”* (Acts 4:32). It has moved them to a life of total selflessness, for none of them said *“that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common”* (Acts 4:32). There is the incarnation of a word that was later written by James: *“But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy”* (James 3:17).

However, in the midst of the outpouring of the Spirit, and the consistent proclamation of the truth,

there was another kind of response. The powers of darkness are not only being shaken, they are reacting to that shaking. They are increasing in their hostility, and becoming more aggressive in their opposition. Those who have not received the love of the truth are no longer willing to merely talk about it. They are not satisfied with making threats. Now they issue a call to arms, and come out with an aggressive attack upon the church. They do not focus upon the apostles, as they had before, but on the church. They do not single out certain proclaimers of the truth, as they did with Stephen, but openly oppose the church.

This is Satan’s attempt to stamp

out the church – and it is all under the government of Christ. From his viewpoint, it is an effort to draw the woman, carrying her away with a flood of persecution (Rev 12:15). However, from heaven’s point of view, this is nothing less than a confirmation of the malignity of the world from which God has delivered the believers.

### How the Opposition Grew

Beginning with John the Baptist, things began to change in the land of the Jews. Until that time, and for a long time, the people had been sitting in great darkness. When Jesus arrived on the scene, it is said of the region Zebulun, Nephtholim, Jordan, and Galilee, *“The*

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people which sat in darkness saw great light; and to them which sat in the region and shadow of death light is sprung up" (Matt 4:16). At the first, there was very little opposition, and the novelty of the new life seemed to catch the powers of darkness off guard. However, little by little, the face of the old serpent began to show, slowly escalating until the time of our text. Allow me to track that progress from John the Baptist until the time of our text.

- ⇨ The Pharisees and lawyers rejected the counsel of God through John, not being baptized by him (Luke 7:30).
- ⇨ Some people said John had a demon (Matt 11:18).
- ⇨ Said He was "the carpenter's son," and were "offended in Him" (Matt 13:55-56).
- ⇨ When Jesus began preaching, His enemies first sought to snare Him by means of questions and words (Mark 12:13; Lk 11:54).
- ⇨ Some charged Jesus with having a demon and being "mad" (John 10:20).

- ⇨ Working with Judas, they finally arrested Jesus, tried Him, abuse him, and delivered Him to Pilate to be crucified, thus culminating their hatred of Him (Mk 15:1-22).
- ⇨ Following Pentecost, the chief priests and Temple militia ordered Peter and John to stop preaching, threatening them with harm (Acts 4:21).
- ⇨ The next time they arrested the apostles, they beat them before they let them go, again ordering them not to preach in Jesus' name (Acts 5:40).
- ⇨ Now, after feigning a trial, Stephen has been stoned in the ultimate act of hatred and rejection (Acts 7:58-60).

Thus the hostility of the flesh against the Spirit was beginning to grow. The enemies of God became more and more bold – increasing in their aggressiveness against those who proclaimed the truth. Their opposition will, in fact, explode in an enterprising and bold initiative against the church of the living God. From the standpoint of

**Now, the stoning of Stephen by the council awakened a spirit in others that had been, in a manner of speaking, asleep. That is what happens when iniquity is eagerly expressed, and those who have not received the love of the truth openly display their hostility against the ones who declare that truth.**

- ⇨ After he preached in his home town, the people "thrust Him out of the city," leading Him to the brow of a hill from which they intended to throw Him (Lk 4:29).
- ⇨ Soon His enemies began to regularly plot how they might kill Jesus (John 5:18; 7:1).
- ⇨ As the time of Jesus' death drew near, His enemies became more aggressive in seeking a way to kill Him (Matt 26:4; Lk 22:2).

the enemy, it will look like they are gaining the advantage. They imagine that they had rid themselves of the Prophet from Nazareth, and now they think they have removed the influence of Stephen. They think that their seeming success confirms they are on the right track, so they will increase their efforts. Keep in mind that this is all being done in the name of the Lord, and a people who are supposedly protecting the truth.

**AT THAT TIME**  
 "... And at that time ..." Other

versions read, "on that day,"<sup>NASB</sup> "That day,"<sup>NRSV</sup> "starting with that day,"<sup>CJB</sup> "in that day,"<sup>MRD</sup> "began that day,"<sup>NLT</sup> "there came in that day,"<sup>YLT</sup> and "on this very day."<sup>MONTGOMERY</sup>

As great a tragedy as the stoning of Stephen was, it was not the height of the opposition. Rather, it was the beginning. Now, in fulfillment of the word of Isaiah the prophet, "the enemy shall come in like a flood" (Isa 59:19). What was once done behind closed doors is now brought into the public arena. The leading Jews who once feared the people (Acts 5:26), now fear them no longer. The people who once magnified the disciples following the death of Ananias and Sapphira are not as bold in their support as they once were. Gamaliel does not rise in defense of the proclaimers as he once did. The whole environment of Jerusalem is changed from that in which the Gospel was being spread, to one in which the believers are fiercely opposed.

The words "at that time" mean the described action took place on that very day, when Stephen was stoned to death. The deed wrought against Stephen, though unspeakably cruel and heartless, became the catalyst for an outbreak of violent opposition to the church.

**A Principle to be Seen**

There are wicked deeds that do not stand by themselves, but give birth to wickedness that is more profound and extensive. There is a spirit to iniquity as well as personalities that commit it. Paul called referred to this nature as "the mystery of iniquity," or "the secret power of lawlessness"<sup>NIV</sup> (2 Thess 2:7). The Basic Bible English version refers to this as "the secret of evil." Sin and transgression are an expression of principle of iniquity, or "the law of sin" (Rom 7:23,25), or "the law of sin and death" (Rom 8:2). While this "law" is resident in "the flesh," its source is the wicked one. When one or more people allow "the flesh" to express itself, it has a kind of domino affect upon all who are dominated by the flesh, or sinful nature. When, for example, the chief priests and rulers of the people launched an initiative against the Lord Jesus, "all the people" eventually became involved.

When challenged by Pilate concerning the legitimacy of the trial of Jesus, *“all the people . . . said, His blood be on us, and on our children”* (Mat 27:25). When Pilate asked if the people would have him release Jesus to them, *“the chief priests moved the people, that he should rather release Barabbas unto them”* (Mark 15:11).

Now, the stoning of Stephen by the council awakened a spirit in others that had been, in a manner of speaking, asleep. That is what happens when iniquity is eagerly expressed, and those who have **not** received the love of the truth openly display their hostility against the ones who declare that truth. Their sinful expression are like a trumpet call to those who are dominated by sin, summoning them into a wicked initiative against truth.

It is this principle that gives birth to wicked fads and trends. Such things do not rise of their own accord. Some evil person opens the floodgates of iniquity, whether by a word or deed. Their personal objective may be to only satisfy their own lusts, but sin will not remain at that level. There is an evil synergy in sin that causes it to spread, with evil men and seducers waxing *“worse and worse”* (2 Tim 3:13). Just as surely as the truth spreads, causing a multiplication of believers (Acts 2:47; 5:14; 6:1,7), so iniquity spreads and increases, sending a wake of evil influence upon those whose hearts are hard and calloused.

If men are not sensitive to this nature of things, they will treat intrusions of sin as though were innocent, and will not deal with them properly. This is why Ananias and Sapphira were purged from the church, even though their transgression might not have appeared to be that serious. It is also why Paul commanded the Corinthian church to purge a certain fornicator from their assembly – and to do so immediately. He did not tell them to counsel that man or to attempt to restore him. The man who was living with his father’s wife was like a staph infection that had to be cut out of the assembly, lest the whole of it be further defiled. In order for that assembly to be restored to wholeness, the expulsion of the fornicator had to take place. That is

precisely why Paul wrote, *“Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us”* (1 Cor 5:7).

The principle of the spreading of is also seen in another word of warning to the church. *“Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled”* (Heb 12:15). In confirmation of this, Paul warned the Corinthians, *“Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt good manners”* (1 Cor 15:33).

It is also seen in the wicked king Jeroboam, *“who did sin, and who made Israel to sin”* (1 Kgs 14:16). On one occasion, an expression of the flesh broke

who *“speak great swelling words of vanity,”* and through them *“allure through the lusts of the flesh, through much wantonness, those that were clean escaped from them who live in error”* (2 Pet 2:18).

There is a current mentality extant within the professed church that places an inordinate emphasis upon the individual. At the same time, there is an almost total absence of a concern for the body of Christ itself. All manner of reasoning is presented to support this approach, but it has not yielded good results.

Every tenderhearted person is concerned for the recovery of those who have been *“overtaken in a fault.”* However, great care must be taken in

**The people of God cannot afford to be naive about such things. The aggressive nature of iniquity will not lie dormant while simplistic people address dangerous situations. In view of this circumstance, it is imperative that the professing church have the mind of Christ concerning both righteousness and iniquity.**

out among the brethren, as Peter separated himself from certain Gentile believers because he feared the criticism certain Jews. It is written of that occasion, *“And the other Jews dissembled likewise with him; insomuch that Barnabas also was carried away with their dissimulation”* (Gal 2:13). Paul also warned Timothy of certain corrupt teachings saying, *“But shun profane and vain babblings: for they will increase unto more ungodliness”* (2 Tim 2:16). Peter also spoke of false prophets who would privately bring damnable heresies within the church. *“But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction. And many shall follow their pernicious ways; by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of”* (2 Pet 2:1-2). He also warned of those

such a work, which must only be done by those who are *“spiritual,”* or mature in Christ. Here is how Paul stated the case. *“Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted”* (Gal 6:1). And why is it that such care must be taken? Why must the person who endeavors to restore a transgressor do so with meekness, carefully considering **himself**? **It is because of the spreading nature of iniquity!** It is like an uncontrollable substance that creeps into every nook and cranny.

The people of God cannot afford to be naive about such things. **The aggressive nature of iniquity will not lie dormant while simplistic people address dangerous situations.** In view of this circumstance, it is imperative that the professing church have the mind of

Christ concerning both righteousness and iniquity. It is said of the Savior of the body, *“Thou hast loved righteousness, and hated iniquity; therefore God, even thy God, hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness above thy fellows”* (Heb 1:9). There you have the mind of Christ delineated, and the response of the God of heaven to it. This is a matter that has been revealed, and it must not be ignored. Furthermore, this is something that has been known for centuries. The Psalmist expressed it well hundreds of years before Jesus entered the world. *“Ye that love the LORD, hate evil”* (Psa 97:10). Again he exhorted, *“Depart from evil”* (Psa 34:14). The Psalmist himself resolved, *“I will set no wicked thing before mine eyes: I hate the work of them that turn aside; it shall not cleave to me”* (Psa 101:3). Again he said, *“I hate every false way”* (Psa 119:104). And again, *“I hate and abhor lying”* (Psa 119:163). Solomon said, *“The fear of the Lord is to hate evil”* (Prov 8:13). Amos admonished the people, *“Hate the evil”* (Amos 5:15). Paul confessed that he **hated** unwanted thoughts that were hurled at him like

any acceptable level. It has caused the nominal church to be gullible, so that he drinks in all kinds of false doctrine. It has caused it to be tolerant of those whom Jesus will not allow in his body, which is the church. There are churches without number who have active members whose names are not written in heaven, and who, by virtue of their friendship with the world, are actually the enemies of God (James 4:4).

#### What Does All of This Mean?

And what does all of this mean? It simply means that conditions are in place for the professing church to launch a persecution of those who have received the love of the truth. Institutionalism has birthed a church that is more like council who stoned Stephen than the church that endured persecution. It does not require an astute thinker to discern this. Already there are countless believers throughout the land who are sorrowful because they are not being fed, encouraged, nurtured, or strengthened during the church gatherings they attend. There are older and faithful ministers who are being

. . .” Other versions read, *“a severe persecution,”* <sup>NRSV</sup> *“a violent attack,”* <sup>BBE</sup> *“intense persecution,”* <sup>CJB</sup> *“widespread persecution,”* <sup>GWN</sup> *“bitter persecution,”* <sup>NJB</sup> *“a great wave of persecution,”* <sup>NLT</sup> *“a great and severe persecution,”* <sup>AMPLIFIED</sup> *“the church . . . suffered terribly,”* <sup>CEV</sup> and *“cruel persecution.”* <sup>GNB</sup>

Because of the spiritual state of the Jewish people at large, the death of Stephen was like an earthquake that produced a giant tsunami wave of persecution – violent and extensive oppression. **It did not come from the political section, but from the religious segment of society!**

This was actually the initiative of Satan, seeking to cause the church to be *“carried away”* in a floodtide of persecution (Rev 12:15). As *“the kings of the earth and the rulers”* were formerly *“gathered together against the Lord, and against His Christ”* (Acts 4:26), now the Jewish rulers and people joined forces against the church. Like Pilate and Herod who, though formerly foes, were joined in their opposition to Christ (Lk 23:12), now the Pharisees and Sadducees who were theologically at variance (Acts 23:8), joined together to oppress the church.

#### POLITICAL OPPRESSION VERSUS PERSECUTION

What we are reading of is a *“a great persecution against the church.”* This was not a political initiative, as when the Roman ruler Claudius *“commanded all Jews to depart from Rome”* (Acts 18:2). This was **not** an issue of political rights, as when Paul appealed to his rights as a Roman citizen (Acts 22:25-28).

When there is political oppression, either a good law is not being honored, or a change in the law is required. That is why men call for equal rights and just treatment of the citizenry. However, this is not how persecution is handled, and we ought not allow unlearned leaders to direct our thinking as though that was the case.

Throughout our world, there are great numbers of believers who are being persecuted. The latest report of Voice of the Martyrs (8/2007) lists initiatives

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fiery darts from the devil (Rom 7:15,24). He admonished believers, *“abhor that which is evil”* (Rom 12:9).

**It is because of the absence of the hatred of evil that Stephen was stoned.** If the mindset of David had been owned by them, they would never have carried out their dastardly deed!

#### Our Time

I will tell you that the modern church **does not hate iniquity** as it should, else it would not be allowing the monumental intrusions of it that are taking place in our time. In fact, there does not appear to be a hatred of evil at

placed on the inactive list, while unlearned novices are being exalted to places of organizational prominence. Stephen would have no more success in many of the churches of our land than he did before the council that stoned him.

Unless this situation is addressed and resolved, there is no hope for the American church. If it does not rid itself of those who insist on maintaining a worldly mindset further and extensive defilement cannot be avoided.

#### A GREAT PERSECUTION

*“. . . there was a great persecution*

against believers in India, Egypt, Azerbaijan, Turkey, Malaysia, Burma, Indonesia, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Pakistan, Iraq, North Korea, China, etc. There is also the beginnings of persecution in our own country, as prayer and witnessing is being outlawed in public places. Iniquity is spreading!

#### A Complicating Factor

As if the persecutions that are being unleashed were not bad enough, the churches of our country are in a weakened and even emaciated state. That is why they are admonishing people to contact their congressmen and senators, seeking for equal rights for Christians. They have no power with God, and are this seeking help from Egypt. Now, when strong believers are needed to stem the tide of iniquity, we have a church on our hands that has *“denied the power,”* and thus has no basis for a powerful appeal to the Living God. In the early church, when threats broke out against the proclaimers, the body of Christ went to the Lord, pleading for boldness to preach the Word (Acts 4:24-30). They had an understanding of the situation, and therefore prayed with insight. Their prayer was answered, and the truth continued to spread.

However, when the church is like the world, it cannot be rallied to call upon the name of the Lord. We cannot depend upon flighty novices and entertainers to have power with both God and men. During the last few years we have had a number of professing Christian leaders who have called for boycotts, contacting political representatives, and all-out initiative to elect Christian politicians. It is as though the whole matter of the social conditions about us have been divorced from the Living God. The effects of all of these efforts have by no means stemmed the tide of iniquity, which continues to increase exponentially, both in and out of the church.

One of the effects of spiritual Babylon is the withering of the ability to properly assess opposition. In our text, the aggression against believers is described as *“a great persecution against the church.”* However, who is referring to the current initiatives against God’s people in such a manner? It is all being described in political language, with

rights and political freedom at the forefront of the thought. We should not expect assessments like this to produce in form of spiritual power, whether expressed in Gospel initiatives, proper responses, or wise reactions.

#### AGAINST THE CHURCH

*“ . . . against the church which was at Jerusalem . . . ”* Other versions read, *“against the Messianic Community,”*<sup>CJB</sup> *“against the assembly,”*<sup>DARBY</sup> *“the church which was at Jerusalem,”*<sup>PNT</sup> and *“the congregation.”*<sup>TNT</sup>

Note, the persecution was not leveled at A church, but *“THE church which was at Jerusalem.”* Spiritually speaking, this is very precise. Speaking in the flesh, it is very general. If, for example, our local newspaper said there was a persecution raised against the

- ⇒ The sons of God (1 John 3:1).
- ⇒ Those are born of God (1 John 3:9).
- ⇒ Those who are in Christ (Rom 8:1).
- ⇒ New creatures (2 Cor 5:17).
- ⇒ The temple of God (1 Cor 3:16-17).
- ⇒ The fulness of Him that filleth all in all (Eph 1:23).
- ⇒ The habitation of God (Eph 2:22).
- ⇒ Those who have the Spirit of Christ (Rom 8:9).
- ⇒ Those who have been delivered from the power of darkness and translated into the kingdom of God’s dear Son

**In order to better appreciate precisely what our text is saying, let us consider some synonyms for “the church.” These are the ones against whom this persecution was unleashed.**

church in Joplin, which one would it be? Or, would it be all of them? When we speak about Jerusalem, there is no trouble in understanding what was intended, for at that time the believers were of *“one accord”* (2:46), and of *“one heart and of one soul”* (Acts 4:32).

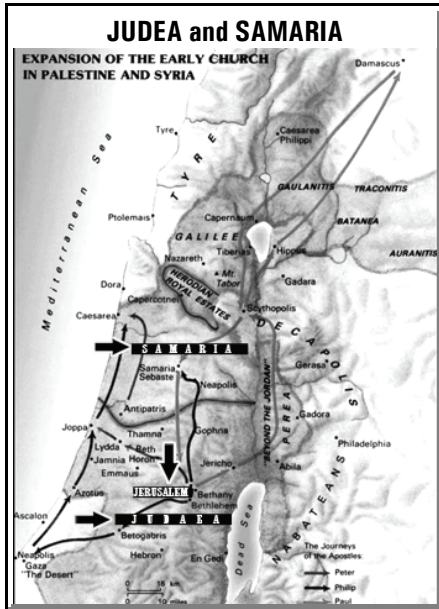
#### Synonyms for the Church

In order to better appreciate precisely what our text is saying, let us consider some synonyms for *“the church.”* These are the ones against whom this persecution was unleashed.

- ⇒ The disciples (Acts 6:1).
- ⇒ The believers (Acts 5:14).
- ⇒ All that believed (Acts 2:44).
- ⇒ The body of Christ (Eph 4:12).
- ⇒ Members of His body (Eph 5:30).
- ⇒ The children of God (Gal 3:26).

- (Col 1:13).
- ⇒ Those who are strangers and pilgrims in the world (1 Pet 2:11).
- ⇒ The citizens of heaven (Phil 3:20).
- ⇒ Those who are holding fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope (Heb 3:6).
- ⇒ Those who are dead with Christ (Rom 6:8).
- ⇒ Those who have been raised to walk in newness of life (Rom 6:4).
- ⇒ Those who are walking by faith (2 Cor 5:7).
- ⇒ Those who are being saved by hope (Rom 8:24-25).
- ⇒ Those who have crucified the flesh (Gal 5:24).
- ⇒ Those who have been circumcised by Christ (Col 2:12).

- ⇒ Those who have been raised up and made to sit together with Christ in heavenly places (Eph 2:7).
- ⇒ Those who know the Lord (Heb 8:11).
- ⇒ Those who call upon the name of the Lord (1 Cor 1:2).



- ⇒ Those who are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works (Eph 2:10).
- ⇒ Those who have been baptized into Christ (Gal 3:27).
- ⇒ Those who have been joined to the Lord and are of one spirit with Him (1 Cor 6:17).

- ⇒ Those who have passed from death unto life (1 John 3:14).
- ⇒ Those who have been washed, sanctified, and justified (1 Cor 6:11).
- ⇒ The righteous (1 Pet 3:12).
- ⇒ Those who do not love the world or the things that are in the world (1 John 2:15-16).
- ⇒ The salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matt 5:13-14).
- ⇒ Those into whose hearts God has shined with the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor 4:6).
- ⇒ Those who are being changed from one increasing stage of glory to another by the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 3:18).
- ⇒ Those who are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit (Rom 8:9).
- ⇒ Those who hear the voice of Christ and follow Him (John 10:27).
- ⇒ Those who have the law of God written upon the hearts and put into their minds (Heb 8:10; 10:16).
- ⇒ Those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus (1 Cor 1:2).
- ⇒ Those who are justified by faith and have peace with God (Rom 5:1).

These are only a sampling of the various statements concerning the identity of the people of God – the church, which is the body of Christ. There is no such thing as an acceptable person or group of persons that is not so characterized.

The fact that there is a kind of strange sound to these inspired descriptions is a commentary on the state of the modern church. However, we must not allow ourselves to be confused on this matter. When the Spirit says a “*great persecution*” was launched against the church, He is not speaking of opposition to Bible reading, providing a thorough review of State history, or taxing religious institutions. This was an initiative launched against people – people who were living by faith and walking in contradiction of this present evil world. These people were shining “as lights in the world,” and it was convicting to those who had settled down in the theological muck of the times.

On the very Stephen was stoned, the persecution was launched, applying pressure to the believers. It was all designed to purge Jerusalem of their influence, and to overthrow the obvious intentions of the disciples. Already they had been charged with filling Jerusalem with their teaching, or doctrine (Acts 5:26).

Now, we want to take care to observe the way in which the church responds to this persecution. This will be a revelation of what they really possess.

## THEY WERE ALL SCATTERED

“<sup>1c</sup> . . . and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria . . .” Other versions read, “*went away*,”<sup>BBE</sup> “*dispersed*,”<sup>DOUAY</sup> “*forced to scatter*,”<sup>NET</sup> and “*fled*.”<sup>LIVING</sup>

This time, the disciples do not pray as they did when they were first threatened (Acts 4:24ff). There seemed to be an awareness among them that this was a different circumstance than they

had first encountered. We know this was not a rash or thoughtless response because of what they did.

Owing to them living by faith and walking in the Spirit, it appears clear to me that they were able to correlate their experience with the words of the Lord Jesus. Those who had not personally heard them were no doubt apprised of them by those who knew them by

experience. Here is what Jesus had told them. “*But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth*” (Acts 1:8). Already they had “*filled*” Jerusalem with their doctrine, declaring what the Jews had done, what God the Father had done, and what Jesus had accomplished. He had also told

them that *“repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name beginning at Jerusalem”* (Lk 24:47).

Some are of the opinion that the disciples had not one right in remaining in Jerusalem, and this were forced out of the city to do what Jesus had commanded them to do. This, however, is nothing more than institutional folklore imagined to support the view of some concerning the recruitment of souls for the institution. This will become increasingly apparent as we proceed through this text.

### WHERE THE DISCIPLES DISPERSED

It is interesting to note where the disciples were scattered or dispersed: “throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria.” This precisely coincides with the word given to them by the Lord before He ascended into heaven: *“ye shall be witnesses unto Me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samara.”*

The land of Canaan was divided into three sections. The upper region was Galilee. The middle region was Samaria. The lower region was Judea, in which Jerusalem was located. Ultimately, there were churches in all three regions. Thus it is written in Acts 9:31, *“Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied”* (Acts 9:31). However, in Christ’s word to his disciples, He omitted Galilee. Also, when the disciples were dispersed, Galilee is not included in the regions into which they were dispersed.

There is a reason for this, and it is worthy of notation. During His earthly ministry, Jesus spent most His time in Galilee, with occasional visits to Samaria and Judaea. The Gospel tells us that as soon as John the Baptist was martyred, Jesus went into Galilee. At that time He left Nazareth (also in Galilee), where He was raised, and went into Galilee proper. Matthew records it in these words, *“Now when Jesus had heard that John was cast into prison, he departed into Galilee; And leaving Nazareth, he came and dwelt in Capernaum, which is upon the sea coast, in the borders of Zabulon and Nephthalim”* (Mat 4:12-13). This was done, we are told, *“That it might be*

*fulfilled which was spoken by Esaias the prophet, saying, The land of Zabulon, and the land of Nephthalim, by the way of the sea, beyond Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles; (Mat 4:15)*

*The people which sat in darkness saw great light; and to them which sat in the region and shadow of death light is sprung up”* (Matt 4:14-16).



However, Jesus was not well received in this region, thus confirming that it had been a kind of citadel of the powers of darkness. Although most of His mighty works were done in that region, yet He upbraided them because of the rampant unbelief in those parts. *“Then began he to upbraid the cities wherein most of his mighty works were done, because they repented not: Woe unto thee, Chorazin! woe unto thee, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works, which were done in you, had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the day of judgment, than for you. And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted unto heaven, shalt be brought down to hell: for if the mighty works, which have been done in thee, had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I say unto you, That it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for thee”* (Mat 11:20-24).

You may also recall the unbelief that was found in Nazareth, where He was brought up, and where He regularly attended the local synagogue. That is the place where they gave a miserable response to Jesus, and where He could do no mighty works. *“And when He was come into His own country, He taught*

*them in their synagogue, insomuch that they were astonished, and said, Whence hath this man this wisdom, and these mighty works? Is not this the carpenter's son? is not His mother called Mary? and His brethren, James, and Joses, and Simon, and Judas? And His sisters, are they not all with us? Whence then hath this man all these things? And they were offended in Him. But Jesus said unto them, A prophet is not without honor, save in His own country, and in His own house. And He did not many mighty works there because of their unbelief’* (Matt 13:58; Mk 6:1-5). In Luke’s account of this time, he informs us of the reaction of the synagogue crowd to His words: *“And all they in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath, and rose up, and thrust Him out of the city, and led Him unto the brow of the hill whereon their city was built, that they might cast him down headlong, But he passing through the midst of them went his way”* (Luke 4:28-30).

Now, coincidentally, all of these cities were in Galilee: Bethsaida, Chorazin, Capernaum, and Nazareth. They had all been visited with light, and yet they spurned it, offering up such a wave of unbelief that Jesus rebuked them. Then, as though underscoring that they had been the first to be subjected to the Gospel of the Kingdom, He leaves them out of the commission to preach in the land of the Jews. Later they would hear the Word, but in them the saying would be fulfilled, *“So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen”* (Matt 20:16).

God was in this whole matter, working out His will in a most precise manner. Jesus had told the disciples to begin preaching in Jerusalem – and that is precisely what they did. Because this was the *“mother church,”* as men would put it, it was essential that it be grounded and settled. Time was therefore allowed for this to happen – a time during which some powerful proclaimers of the Word would be raised up to carry the apostles doctrine elsewhere.

The Jerusalem church, like those that would spring up where Paul and his co-laborers ministered, would not be abandoned in the fledgling youth. That is something that is quite common in our

time, but it is not the way the Holy Spirit leads the true servants of God. The Jerusalem church had been duly tutored in the ways of the Lord.

- ⇒ They had learned by experience the value of ministering to and waiting upon the Lord (Acts 1:13-14).
- ⇒ They had learned how to reason upon the basis of Scripture, particularly in the choosing of Matthias (Acts 1:15-26).
- ⇒ They had experienced the illumination and empowerment of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-4).
- ⇒ They knew how to handle sudden and significant increases in the number of disciples (Acts 2:41; 4:4; 5:14; 6:7).
- ⇒ They knew the joy of the unity of the faith and the unity of the Spirit (Acts 1:14; 2:1,44,46; 4:24,32; 5:12).
- ⇒ They had known the chaffing effects of opposition (Acts 4:1,18-21; 5:17-40; 7:58-60).
- ⇒ They had learned the power of prayer (Acts 4:24-31).
- ⇒ They proved faithful in serving the Lord, even when it involved imprisonment and beating (Acts 4:19-20; 5:20-29).

**was directing a church that was walking in the newness of life. The fact that He did not direct them in the manner that is commonly taught among professed Christians is a matter worth pondering. I am afraid that the modern church has been inundated with the traditions men, just as the Jew of old.**

- ⇒ They had witnessed the pruning of unproductive branches from the church (Acts 5:1-10).
- ⇒ They were able to choose godly men to fulfill needed ministries (Acts 6:1-6).
- ⇒ They knew the reality and effects of martyrdom among their number (Acts 7:58-60).

These people were well able to penetrate society with the Word of God, They had been walking in the light, experiencing Divine fellowship, and perfecting holiness in the fear of the Lord.

#### **They Go Into Familiar Territory**

Now, the scattered disciples go into areas where extensive preaching had already been done. John the Baptist had preached in Judaea (Matt 2:1). People from Judaea had heard Jesus Himself (Matt 4:25). Jesus had gone into Judaea and preached to multitudes (Matt 19:1). Jesus had also preached in

Samaria, and whole multitudes had believed on Him from there (Luke 17:11; John 4:4-42).

These disciplines were not being recalcitrant about fulfilling what men refer to as “the great commission,.” Jesus never did say that preaching to the lost took the precedence over nourishing believers. In fact He thrice told Peter to “feed” His people: “*feed My lambs . . . feed My sheep . . . feed My sheep*” (John 21:15-17). Once, when He told Peter that Satan had desired him to sift Him as wheat, and after telling him He had prayed for him that his faith fail not, He added, “*and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren*” (Luke 22:32).

The point to be seen here is that Jesus was directing a church that was walking in the newness of life. The fact that He did not direct them in the manner that is commonly taught among professed Christians is a matter worth pondering. I am afraid that the modern church has been inundated with the traditions men, just as the Jew of old.

### **EXCEPT THE APOSTLES**

“<sup>1d</sup> . . . **except the apostles.**” Other versions read, “*all but the apostles.*”<sup>BBE</sup> and “*only the apostles stayed there.*”<sup>IE</sup>

Now is a circumstance that is worthy of contemplation. Since the apostles were the principle proclaimers of the Word, and the ones appointed over the work of the Lord, you might think the enemies would have driven them out of Jerusalem. They were the ones who had been charged with filling Jerusalem with their doctrine (Acts 5:28). However, they are not the ones who are scattered.

This confirms the aggression against the saints was being controlled from the heavens, for “*the heavens do rule*” (Dan 4:26). It certainly was not that the enemies of faith were unconcerned about the apostles. They had twice set out to rid themselves of the influence of these twelve men, and were unable to do so. God had set up His Kingdom during the times of competitive kingdoms, just as Daniel said (Dan 2:44). It would break all opposing authority in pieces, but it would not be broken. Neither, indeed, could the enemies of the faith remove the principle leaders from the scene, which

they would gladly have done if they could. What is more, they were not at peace with the apostles – at least not willingly.

While the church was being more firmly established, God caused the enemies of the apostles to be at peace with them, even though, through great persecution, they scattered the church.

The Lord has ordained that the church be placed the foundation set in place by the apostles (Eph 2:20). He would not allow any person to interfere

with that work. God has consistently worked in this manner. When He sent Moses, the work assigned to him was completed (Deut 34:4-7). When he raised up Joshua, the work given to him was brought to completion (Josh 23:1). The prophets all delivered the messages they were given to proclaim 91 Pet 1:10-12). Solomon completed the building of the first Temple (1 Kgs 6:9), and Zerubbabel

finished the building of the second (Zech 4:9). Daniel completed his prodigious ministry in Babylon (Dan 12:13). Nehemiah completed the wall he was raised to build (Neh 6:15). John the Baptist brought his work to a satisfactory conclusion (John 3:30). The Lord Jesus completed the redemptive assignment given to him – to lay down His life and take it up again (John 19:30). Paul

finished the course that had been laid out before him (2 Tim 4:7).

Those who engage in the work of the Lord do well to first determine what God has given them to do. Once that has been found, then they are to labor with all their might in full confidence that God will enable them to finish their work.

## DEVOUT MEN BURY STEPHEN

**“<sup>2</sup> And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him.”**

All believers were not scattered from Jerusalem, for here we find some men taking the time to bury Stephen.

### DEVOUT MEN

“And devout men . . .” Other versions read, “*Godly men*,”<sup>NIV</sup> “*God-fearing men*,”<sup>BBE</sup> “*pious men*,”<sup>DARBY</sup> and “*believing men*.”<sup>MRD</sup>

GINGRICH

A devout person is a thinking person – and they are godly because of their thoughts. They are aggressive to take hold of, and carefully consider the truth of God, bringing their lives into conformity to it. By their very nature, they are selfless – that is why they are devoted to the Lord and to the due consideration of His truth.

Our day is not one that encouraged men to be devout. This is particularly true of the religious world. There is too much of self in the religion of

number of Greeks who joined Paul and Silas (Acts 17:4). A group of people with whom Paul met, proclaiming the Gospel (acts 17:17). Ananias, who was called of God to anoint Saul of Tarsus and set him aside for the apostleship (Acts 22:12).

Following Stephen’s stoning, there was the matter of the disposal of his body. It was devout men who attended to this matter. These were men who took both life and death seriously, and sought to do the appropriate thing.

### HIS BURIAL

“... carried *Stephen to his burial*, . . .” Other versions read, “*buried Stephen*,”<sup>NASB</sup> “*were careful together touching Stephen*,”<sup>PNT</sup> “*dressed Stephen*,”<sup>TNT</sup> and “*helped to carry out and bury*.”<sup>AMPLIFIED</sup>

Throughout Scripture, there is a consistent thread of burying people. There is absolutely no question about this being the manner of godly people. Yet, with all of these words there isn’t a growing number of people who prefer cremation to burial. It is with this in mind that I wish to say a few words in the defense of burial.

### The Body, An Essential Part of Man

While the body is certainly not the totality of man, it is an essential part of the human makeup. Our text says devout man “*carried Stephen to his burial*” – not his body, but Stephen. When Jesus came to raise Lazarus from the dead, He asked his sisters, “*Where have ye laid him?*” (John 11:34). When a holy angel met the women who came to anoint the body of Jesus, He said to them, “*behold the place*

**My purpose here is to confirm WHY burial is the historical practice of those who believe on Jesus. It is also to confirm the heathen origins and associations of cremation, which are of no small significance.**

This is a day when we do well to consider devout men. This is word that is not common in our day, and devout men are themselves even less common than the word. The word “*devout*” is translated from the Greek word εὐλαβεῖς (eula-beis). it has a very arresting lexical meaning: “*taking hold well; carefully and surely, cautious . . . reverencing God, pious, religious,*”<sup>THAYER</sup> “*strictly taking hold of well, hence cautious, devout, pious, as a characteristic of one who carefully observes the law,*”<sup>FRIBERG</sup> “*reverent,*”<sup>UBS</sup> “*pertaining to being reverent toward God,*”<sup>LOUW-NIDA</sup> “*undertaking prudently, discreet, cautious, circumspect,*”<sup>LIDDELL-SCOTT</sup> “*keeping clean of, keeping from,*”<sup>LEH</sup> “*God-fearing.*”

our time. Men are prone to consider fleshly interests rather than spiritual ones. It is not likely that such people will be used by God – at least not for noble purposes.

The Scriptures speak of several “*devout*” men. Simeon, who was “*just and devout,*” and was called of God to bless the holy Jesus, together with Joseph and Mary (Lk 2:25). The Jews who were present on the day of Pentecost, and from among whom three thousand gladly received the word and were baptized (Acts 2:5). Cornelius, the first Gentile to officially hear the Gospel (Acts 10:2). A

where they laid **Him**” (Mk 16:6). When Paul accounted for the death of Christ, he said, “*And when they had fulfilled all that was written of Him, they took Him down from the tree, and laid Him in a sepulcher*” (Acts 13:29).

My purpose here is to confirm WHY burial is the historical practice of those who believe on Jesus. It is also to confirm the heathen origins and associations of cremation, which are of no small significance. This is NOT intended to be the cause of division in the body of Christ, or a means of enforcing something upon the consciences of those who fail to see this reasoning, even though it is the responsibility of every professing Christ to have and maintain a pure conscience (1 Tim 3:9; 2 Tim 1:3). Rather, it is to show that there is sound logic for rejecting the practice of cremation, and unsound reasoning for accepting it.

Here is a matter where the Apostolic injunction applies: “*Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind*” (Rom 14:5). As in all other areas of life, faith, not doubt, must reign over our reasoning. Is it not written, “*But those who have doubts are condemned if they eat, because they do not act from faith; for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin*”<sup>NRSV</sup> (Rom 14:23). If anyone has doubts on this subject, it is their responsibility to settle doubts by means of their faith, knowledge of God, and fellowship with Christ. Those who practice cremation MUST do so because they are motivated by faith. That is how those in Christ live – “*by faith*” (Rom 1:17; Heb 10:38). I am challenging the notion that this is even possible – that is, that a person can practice cremation by faith.

#### The Burial of Jesus

The “*burial*” of Christ is part of the Gospel. That situation requires some elaboration on the matter of burial. Today, in the Western world, burial is being abandoned in favor of cremation – even among professed believers in Christ. Reasons for the preference of burning to burial are offered. Some of them include, “It makes no difference what we do with the body after the spirit has departed from it.” “It is more economical to cremate the body.” “Why should we make

a big thing out of how we handle a dead body?” These are nothing more than the flesh blurting out its way of thinking.

All of these remarks melt in the light of God’s Word. They are wholly the product of fleshly reasoning, with not a spark of the life of the Spirit in them. When it comes to how we speak of the body, words defending cremation are not “words which the Holy Spirit teaches” (1 Cor 2:13) — and He has spoken about the body.

If we had no other Scriptural insight than the fact of Jesus being “buried,” that should settle the matter for us. Not only is His burial a vital part of the Gospel, it is something in which we participate when we are baptized into Christ — “*buried with Him . . .*” (Rom

is inconsequential. We will find, however, absolute consistency in Scripture in the matter of the death of the righteous.

Prior to his own death, Abraham’s wife Sarah died. Even though godless societies (from which he himself had been extricated) practiced cremation, Abraham buried Sarah’s body. “*And after this, Abraham BURIED Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah before Mamre: the same is Hebron in the land of Canaan*” (Gen 23:19).

In fulfillment of the Word of the Lord, Abraham was buried. “*And his sons Isaac and Ishmael BURIED him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite, which is before Mamre*” (Gen 25:9).

**One of the things declared wherever the Gospel is preached, is the account of a woman who anointed Jesus, by His own word, for His “burial.” Believers should ponder the propriety of anointing a body for cremation, and how such a thought blends with the Gospel of Christ.**

6:4; Col 2:12). Thus Christ’s burial has a twofold significance. If it is countered that Christ’s body was going to be raised from the dead, therefore necessitating His burial, it must be remembered that we too will be raised from the dead. But there is more.

One of the things declared wherever the Gospel is preached, is the account of a woman who anointed Jesus, by His own word, for His “*burial*” (Matt 26:12). Believers should ponder the propriety of anointing a body for cremation, and how such a thought blends with the Gospel of Christ.

#### The Case of Abraham

Abraham was called “*the friend of God*” (James 2:23). It is of interest to note how the Lord spoke to Abraham of his impending death. “*And thou shalt go to thy fathers in peace; thou shalt be BURIED in a good old age*” (Gen 15:15). One might choose to believe the language

#### God Buried Moses

How did the Lord handle the death of His faithful servant, Moses? He certainly had a variety of options open to Him. He had burned up the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19). He had also consumed the wayward sons of Aaron – Nadab and Abihu – with fire (Lev 10:1ff). However, these were judgments, not to be compared with the Lord’s disposition toward Moses. “*And He [God] BURIED him in a valley in the land of Moab, over against Bethpeor: but no man knoweth of his sepulcher unto this day*” (Deut 34:6). How will men account for the practice of cremation when they stand before God. Or do men imagine that a practice that contradicted what God Himself did is of no consequence?

#### Ruth

One of the telling things said by Ruth, when she chose to stay with Naomi

and be identified with her God, was *"Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried"* (Ruth 1:17). How is it that she associated burial with God, but some professing Christian's cannot do so today?

#### Saul and Jonathan

When the Philistines found Saul and Jonathan dead they stripped Saul, cut off his head and taking his armor. They *"put his armor in the house of their gods, and fastened his head in the temple of Dagon"* (2 Sam 21:8-10). They even *"fastened his body to the wall of Bethshan"* (1 Sam 31:10). Certain

Sarah, and Moses. The following is a small sampling of additional references. They include Deborah, Rebekah's nurse (Gen 35:8), Rachel (Gen 35:19), Isaac (Gen 35:29), Jacob (buried in Canaan, Gen 50:13-14), Miriam (Num 20:1), Aaron (Deut 10:6), Joshua (Josh 24:30), the bones of Joseph (Gen 24:32), Eleazar (son of Aaron, Josh 24:33), Gideon (Judges 8:32), Samson (Judges 16:31), Samuel (1 Sam 25:1), the bones of Saul and Jonathan (1 Sam 31:13), Abner (2 Sam 3:32), David (1 Kings 2:10; Acts 2:29), Solomon (1 Kings 11:43), Jehoshaphat (1 Kgs 22:50), John the Baptist (Matt 14:12), and Stephen (Acts

but to carry them out with them when they left the land of bondage (Gen 50:25). No person favoring cremation would have made such a request. However, many years later, when Israel came out of Egypt, *"Moses took the bones of Joseph with him"* (Ex 13:19). Furthermore, when Israel arrived in Canaan forty years later, *"the bones of Joseph, which the children of Israel brought up out of Egypt, buried they in Shechem, in a parcel of ground which Jacob bought of the sons of Hamor the father of Shechem for an hundred pieces of silver: and it became the inheritance of the children of Joseph"* (Josh 24:32).

**How could such an impressive number of references be made to something inconsequential? Is this God's manner, to clutter the minds of men with accounts that have no relevance, minister no understanding, and through which we do not learn of Divine manners?**

valiant men too the bodies of Saul and his son from the wall of Bethshan, *"and burnt them there."* They then took their bones and *"buried them under a tree in Jabesh"* (1 Sam 31:12-13).

The advocates of cremation would reason that it made no difference what happened to those bodies, or to the bones that remained. After all, there was no spirit in them, so what difference did it make. There was, however, a man after God's own heart who did not think in this manner. When David was made king, mention was made of the men that buried Saul. It is written that David sent a special message to those men. *"And David sent messengers unto the men of Jabeshgilead, and said unto them, Blessed be ye of the LORD, that ye have showed this kindness unto your lord, even unto Saul, and have buried him"* (2 Sam 2:4-5). Why did David think in this way, considering a burial to be showing kindness?

#### An Accented Point

The Spirit makes a point of mentioning the burial of God's people. I have already mentioned Abraham,

8:2). There are over thirty other Scriptural references to specific people who were *"buried."*

Before he died, Jacob told Joseph, *"bury me not, I pray thee, in Egypt"* (Gen 47:29). Under the law, a criminal who was hanged was commanded to be *"buried"* (Deut 21:23). A special curse mentioned by David was that in the time of severe judgment, *"there was none to bury them"* (Psa 79:3). Solomon said it would be better for a man to have an *"untimely birth"* (miscarriage) than to *"have no burial"* (Eccl 6:3). It is expressly said that following Jesus' death Joseph of Arimathaea and Nicodemus *"took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury"* (John 19:40).

How could such an impressive number of references be made to something inconsequential? Is this God's manner, to clutter the minds of men with accounts that have no relevance, minister no understanding, and through which we do not learn of Divine manners? The interment of the body was so important to Joseph, that he instructed the children of Israel not to leave his bones in Egypt,

Those supposing that the manner in which we handle the bodies of those who have passed on is inconsequential, need to consider what God Himself did with Moses' body – something that has been revealed in Holy Scripture. In fact, the devil disputed with Michael the archangel about the BODY of Moses – something he apparently did not do concerning Nadab and Abihu, whom God cremated. Also ponder that a critical aspect of the Gospel itself is the BURIAL of Jesus. I hardly see how something could be unimportant that is directly related to Jesus, the Gospel, and our own identify with Him.

For some, this is a sensitive subject – particularly because of current trends favoring cremation. While it is not my intention to cause offense, or to impose rules upon people God has not imposed, it IS my intention to declare what has been said on this subject. Your view of the matter is your own responsibility. I am endeavoring to provide a Scriptural context in which personal decisions on the subject can be reached. However, the decision you embrace is your business, not mine. I am not sitting in judgment, but declaring what is written.

#### Examples of Cremation

Achan and his family (Josh 7:25). They were stoned and *"cremated."* This is certainly not a suitable precedent for believers to follow! Achan was judged for breaking the commandment of the Lord.

Saul and his sons (1 Sam 31:12-13). Technically, this was not a cremation. The bones were preserved (something not always done in cremation)

and buried in keeping with the manner of the people of God.

The Priests of the high places (2 Kgs 23:20). Again, this cannot be adduced as a precedent for those who have embraced the Lord by faith. This action was related to cursing, not blessing. It also was completely dissociated from hope.

The burning of the bones of the king of Edom (Amos 2:1). The Lord denounced Moab because they burned the bones of the king of Edom. *“Thus saith the LORD: For three transgressions of Moab, and for four, I will not turn away the punishment thereof; because he burned the bones of the king of Edom into lime”* (Amos 2:1). Something of the Divine mind is certainly revealed in this word. It ought not be ignored. Not a single person favoring cremation would have viewed the action of the Moabites as God did.

#### A Great Burning for Asa

When Asa died, Scripture says *“a very great burning”* was made for him. However, this was not a cremation, but a burning of spices, for Asa’s body was *“buried in his own sepulcher”* (2 Chron 16:14).

#### Paul’s Allusion to Burning the Body

As to Paul speaking of giving his body to be burned (1 Cor 13:3), he was referring to submitting to martyrdom, not to consenting to the burning of his tabernacle after he was absent from it.

#### A Consistent Manner

Throughout Scripture, burial is always the norm – and there are no exceptions. Historically, wherever the Gospel has been received, the people chose to bury their dead rather than cremate them. During the first century, under the powerful influence of the Gospel of Christ, Rome abandoned cremation in favor of burial. The same thing happened in Scandinavia during the eleventh century. In cultures where God is **not** known, cremation is common. In our own country, the practice arose only when the knowledge of God became sparse and fragmented. That is because the truth of the resurrection is not adequately known among the people. Like the Athenians and Stoics, the

*“resurrection of the dead”* is counted as a strange thing among them (Acts 17:32).

Suffice it to say, no person, however astute can defend the act of cremation from the Word of God. Any and every person seeking to defend this practice resorts to human reasoning. Such logic is wholly inappropriate for the believer! Such wisdom is earthly, and causes dissension and confusion (James 3:15-16). In my judgment, a person cannot request cremation in the name of the Lord, giving thanks to God for it (Col 3:17).

While the manner in which the disposition of the body is handled is not the determining factor in obtaining eternal life, it does reveal a type of thinking totally unknown in Scripture.

**Under no circumstances may our bodies be used as though they did not belong to God, or were in consequential. Our bodies do not belong to us — they have been purchased by God**

No patriarch, Moses, nor any prophet – not Jesus, nor any Apostle – every provided the slightest hint that cremation was, or ever would be, practiced among those embracing the hope of the resurrection. This is an observation that simply cannot be contested.

Scriptures represent burial as an act of faith. It is done in hope of the resurrection. *“So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption; it is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body”* (1 Cor 15:42-44). Just as Christ’s mission was not completed until He rose from the dead, so our salvation is not complete until we too rise from the dead. As it is written, *“Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies”* (Rom 8:23, NIV). How marvelous!

Our *“adoption”* is here equated with the resurrection, or redemption, of our bodies!

We are composed of *“spirit, soul, and body”* (1 Thess 5:23). Salvation addresses us in our totality – spirit, soul, and body. The experience of salvation is not complete until we are raised from the dead. Until that time, we have *“the firstfruits of the Spirit.”* In that condition, we yearn for the completion of our adoption. The burial of the body blends with this stance. Cremation does not.

At the time of its origin, cremation was an act of hopelessness, not hope. Believers throughout the ages, however, have *“planted”* the bodies of their generation in hope of the resurrection. It makes as much sense to burn seed corn in hopes of a harvest as to burn a body in

hope of the resurrection!

Your thoughts, which are between you and your Lord, should be as much in harmony with the Word of God as possible. Even in your death, you should seek a view that is compatible with the ancients, who enjoyed Divine visitations and looked forward to the resurrection. Whatever reasons may be offered for cremation, not a single one of them comes from the Word of God. They are, without exception, founded upon human reason. There is not a syllable in the entirety of Scripture that will in any way support them – not a word that would lead one to embrace them.

All of the arguments about the insignificance of the body fall to the ground in the blaze of the Word of God. The Scriptures are clear on this subject. *“Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take away the members of Christ and make them members of a harlot? May it never be!”* (God forbid, <sup>KJV</sup>) - 1 Cor 6:15. Under

no circumstances may our bodies be used as though they did not belong to God, or were in consequential. Our bodies do not belong to us — they have been purchased by God (1 Cor 6:19). While they are by no means the primary part of our constitution, they have been purchased by Christ, and will yet be redeemed by

themselves not realizing He was to rise from the dead (Luke 24:1). We are even told that Jesus was buried “as the manner of the Jews is to bury” (John 19:40). Rest assured, the Holy Spirit is not commenting on social customs, or fading practices. No word of God is void of power or without profit.

portion of God’s family that is upon the earth. That is why the people lamented.

Throughout history, people have mourned the passing of great men.

- ⇒ When **Sarah** died, Abraham wept for her (Gen 23:2).
- ⇒ When **Jacob** died, the Egyptians mourned for him for seventy days (Gen 50:3).
- ⇒ When **Jacob** was buried in Canaan, they mourned with a great and very sore lamentation (Gen 50:10).
- ⇒ When **Aaron** died, Israel mourned for thirty days (Num 20:29).
- ⇒ When **Moses** died, Israel wept for thirty days (Deut 34:6).
- ⇒ When **Samuel** died, Israel lamented over him (1 Sam 28:3).
- ⇒ When **Saul** and **Jonathan** were slain, David lamented over them (2 Sam 1:19-27).
- ⇒ David mourned over the death of **Abner** (2 Sam 3:31).
- ⇒ When **Hezekiah** died, Israel honored him in his death (2 Chron 32:33).
- ⇒ When king **Josiah** died, Jeremiah lamented for him (2 Chron 35:25).

Particularly when great and godly men pass from this world, it leaves a gaping hole in the wall of Kingdom labors. There have been whole generations, and lengthy periods of time when there was not a single man of the caliber of Stephen. He was a rare spiritual giant who achieved much for the Lord in a relatively short period of time.

Also, in those days there was a closeness within the body of Christ that is scarcely known in our day. There are churches without number in which a godly conversation can scarcely be heard, and few put their hands to the work of the Lord. But it was not so in the days of Stephen. At that time the people were of one accord, one soul, one heart, and one mind. They were frequently together, continuing steadfastly in the apostles

**The death of Stephen, while the gateway through which he passed into the presence of the Lord, was a great loss to the church. A man who is filled with faith, the Holy Spirit, and wisdom, is no small deprivation when taken from the portion**

Him in the resurrection.

The resurrection of Jesus confirmed His Sonship (Rom 1:4). It also confirms the resurrection of believers when He returns. In the above text, Paul argues this point forcefully. “Meats for the belly, and the belly for meats: but God shall destroy both it and them. Now the body is not for fornication, but for the Lord; and the Lord for the body. And God hath both raised up the Lord, and will also raise up us by his own power” (1 Cor 6:13-14). Again, it is written, “*Knowing that He which raised up the Lord Jesus shall raise up us also by Jesus, and shall present us with you*” (2 Cor 4:14). If our bodies are “*the members of Christ,*” and if God is going to raise them “*up,*” we have no right to disregard the Lord in the disposition of them. While this is not to become a point of contention among believers, it is to be laid upon the conscience of us all.

As insignificant as it may appear, burial stands in stark contrast to cremation in Scripture. Apart from the clear teaching of the Word of God on this subject, the burial of the body of Jesus sanctifies the thought for His disciples. If that were all we knew about the interment of the body, it should be enough to constrain us to view it with the utmost respect. God saw fit to record the intentions of holy women of old who had regard for the buried body of Jesus,

For those having difficulty with this rather elementary subject, the question is not whether God is able to raise a body from the sea, the grave, or a pile of ashes. The question is whether God’s people can justify the deliberate choice of a practice that does not blend with the manner of God’s people through the ages, nor harmonize with the hope of the resurrection. The very subject of cremation has the taint of the world upon it. The fragrance of the heathen penetrates every aspect of it. Only the wisdom of the world can make an attempt to justify it. There is neither honor nor hope in it. Faith cannot justify it, and a “*pure conscience*” will question it. Yet today, it is becoming increasingly popular within the church.

**MADE GREAT LAMENTATION**

“ . . . and made great lamentation over him.” Other versions read, “*loud lamentation,*”<sup>NASB</sup> “*mourned deeply,*”<sup>NIV</sup> “*made great weeping,*”<sup>BBE</sup> “*made great mourning over him,*”<sup>DOUAY</sup> “*lamented over him greatly,*”<sup>MRD</sup> “*with great sorrow,*”<sup>LIVING</sup> “*made loud wailing,*”<sup>ALT</sup> and “*mourning for him with loud cries.*”<sup>GNB</sup>

The death of Stephen, while the gateway through which he passed into the presence of the Lord, was a great loss to the church. A man who is filled with faith, the Holy Spirit, and wisdom, is no small deprivation when taken from the

doctrine, in fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers (Acts 2:42). That is why they lamented the death of Stephen. It was not because of mere friendship in the flesh.

I have lived long enough to become acutely aware and sensitive of the passing of godly men. I have also seen a shift in the nature of funerals with miserable messages, the introduction of humor, and a near-total absence of the proclamation of the hope of glory. Something is happening in our time that is not good. They is a diminishment of sensitivity and tenderness, and a waning sense of spiritual values. Men have become fond of referring to funeral services as celebrations, but it is really nothing more than a fad, for you rarely hear anyone celebrating hope, the completion of the good fight of faith, or finishing the course set before them. I believe I know what people are trying to say when they use language like this, but it has the foam of carnality upon it. Then again, in all of Scripture there really is

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no representation of that kind of public reaction to the death of godly people. It is all very troubling to me. In fact, the only death I know of that is really celebrated is the death of Jesus. A new generation of *Christian* leaders is rising to prominence in which the virtues of assurance, faith, and hope are, at the very best, in the background. Were Stephen to have lived in our fair city, and died here, I fear that the reaction of the Christian community would be far different than that of the brethren in our text.

**Spiritual Robbery**

There is a reason for these conditions, as difficult as it is to speak about them. Spiritual Babylon, by making the institution central, has robbed the people of a deep affiliation with one another. Interpersonal associations are too shallow, and do not go deep enough into the heart. Too many are living on the surface of life's sea.

Being workers together with God is not common, and godly discussions and fellowship are become more rare. In such a setting, death cannot possibly be treated as it is in this text.

**AS FOR SAUL...**

***“As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison.”***



From this point on, the thrust of

the book of Acts changes. We now are introduced more fully to a man who will dominate this book from chapter thirteen to the conclusion of the book. Our introduction to him is vastly different than what we know about any other kingdom laborer. I do not recall any other man being called to serve the Lord who came from a background of oppressing the people of God.

**AS FOR SAUL**

*“As for Saul . . .”* Other versions read, *“But Saul,”*<sup>NASB</sup> *“Saul, however,”*<sup>CSB</sup> *“Saul, meanwhile,”*<sup>NAB</sup> *“Saul then,”*<sup>NJB</sup> and *“Paul was like a wild man.”*<sup>LIVING</sup>

Here we have an index to the venomous hatred of Saul of Tarsus for the disciples of Jesus. The stoning of Stephen. Which occasioned great lamentation within the church, had somehow ignited the wrath of Saul. Although a young man, he appeared determined to stamp out what he considered to be a blasphemous

movement.

We are not sure of the precise time period covered in this text. Traditional views put it around two years after Pentecost, although some are of the opinion that is the longest possible period of time. The early life of Saul is also a bit sketchy regarding periods of time. We know he was a Pharisee, and that he was brought up at the feet of Gamaliel. However, precisely when this took place, we do not know. It does appear that he was not in Jerusalem when Jesus was there, but arrived in the area after He had been crucified. He was from *“Tarsus, a city in Cilicia”* (Acts 21:39), that was approximately 400-500 miles from Jerusalem. Paul himself described the city as *“no ordinary city,”*<sup>NIV</sup> or *“an important city.”*<sup>NRSV</sup>

Although described as a *“young man,”* he was very aggressive, and now launches a personal campaign against the followers of Christ

**MADE HAVOC OF THE CHURCH**

“ . . . he made havock of the church . . .” Other versions read, “began ravaging the church,” <sup>NASB</sup> “began to destroy the church,” <sup>NIV</sup> “was ravaging the church,” <sup>NRSV</sup> “laid waste the church,” <sup>ASV</sup> “burning with hate against the church,” <sup>BBE</sup> “tried to destroy the church,” <sup>GWN</sup> “persecuted the church,” <sup>MRD</sup> “began doing great harm to the church,” <sup>NJB</sup> “going everywhere to destroy the church,” <sup>NLT</sup> “going everywhere to devastate the believers,” <sup>LIVING</sup> “cruelly harassed the church,” <sup>WEYMOUTH</sup> “kept trying to destroy the church,” <sup>ISV</sup> “continued to harass the church,” <sup>WILLIAMS</sup> “laid waste the church continuously [with cruelty and violence],” <sup>AMPLIFIED</sup> “making a lot of trouble for the church,” <sup>CEV</sup> and “was doing injury to the church.” <sup>EMTV</sup>

The word “*havoc*” speaks of a wicked initiative with the determination to get rid of what is being opposed. The meaning of the word from which it is derived is, “irrational and relentless persecution; devastate, destroy, do harm, severely injure,” <sup>FRIBERG</sup> and “to affix a stigma to, to dishonor, spot, defile, to treat shamefully or with injury, to ravage, devastate, ruin.” <sup>STRONG’S</sup>

Saul’s aim was apparently twofold. First, to inflict pain upon the church, causing its members to suffer. Second, to make such an example of the believers that people would not be prone to join their number, and the movement would cease its rapid growth. He was, of course, convinced that they were wrong in their doctrine, and thus treated them like Canaanites to be driven out of the land.

It ought to be noted that just as there are mighty individual **godly** warriors, so there are mighty individual **ungodly** aggressors. At this Point, Paul was in the latter group. It will not be long until he will be an aggressor for the Lord Jesus, launching initiatives against the powers of darkness.

**ENTERING EVERY HOUSE**

“ . . . entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison.” Other versions read, “dragging off men and women, committing them to prison,” <sup>NKJV</sup> “drew out both men and women and put them in prison,” <sup>GENEVA</sup> “arresting both men and

women and sending them to prison,” <sup>NJB</sup> and “hauling men and woman committed them to prison.” <sup>WEB</sup> “and “dragging out men and women alike and jailing them,” <sup>LIVING</sup>

Saul even waged a house-to-house campaign in an effort to stamp out the church. He did this without any respect of persons, dragging both men and women into prison.

The word “*haling*” comes from a word meaning, “to draw, to drag on before the judge, to prison, or to punishment,” <sup>THAYER</sup> “moving some along by force,” <sup>FRIBERG</sup> “drag away,” <sup>UBS</sup> and “to pull or drag because of the inertia of the object being dragged.” <sup>LOUW-NIDA</sup> Saul’s action, then, was a

Ponder the aggressiveness of Saul’s campaign against believers.

- ⇨ He went from house to house, dragging off men and women 8:3).
- ⇨ He committed men and women to prison (8:3; 22:4).
- ⇨ He persecuted them unto the death, binding and delivering them into prison (22:4).
- ⇨ He shut many of the saints in Jerusalem in prison (26:10).
- ⇨ He obtained letters from the high

**Thus, in a relatively short time, the new church went from having favor with all the people and the people magnifying them, to being hounded by a fierce persecutor. He entered into their houses, found them in their synagogues, and pursued them into foreign countries. All of this was not punishment for wrong doing on the part of the body of Christ, for they had been faithful.**

violent one in which he forced the people against their will, dragging them out of their homes to a place of judgment, punishment, and sometimes even death.

Years after he was converted, Paul confessed what he had done during the time of our text. “*And I persecuted this way unto the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women. As also the high priest doth bear me witness, and all the estate of the elders: from whom also I received letters unto the brethren, and went to Damascus, to bring them which were there bound unto Jerusalem, for to be punished*” (Acts 22:4-5). Later, he testified again before king Agrippa. “*Which thing I also did in Jerusalem: and many of the saints did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I gave my voice against them. And I punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled them to blaspheme: and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted them even unto strange cities*” (Acts 26:10-11).

priest authorizing him to go into Damascus, and bring believers bound to Jerusalem to be punished (22:5; 26:10).

- ⇨ When the believers were put to death, he gave his voice against them (26:10).
- ⇨ He punished believers often in every synagogue (26:11).
- ⇨ He compelled some of them to blaspheme (26:11).
- ⇨ He even went into “*strange,*” or foreign cities – cities outside the perimeter of Canaan (26:11).

Thus, in a relatively short time, the new church went from having favor with all the people (Acts 2:47) and the people magnifying them (Acts 5:13), to being hounded by a fierce persecutor. He entered into their houses, found them in their synagogues, and pursued them into foreign countries. All of this was not punishment for wrong doing on the part of the body of Christ, for they had been faithful.

This opposition can be seen from two perspectives, and both of them are valid.

- ⇒ The faith of the young church was being tested. In the test, their hearts would be confirmed as to the reality of what they possessed.
- ⇒ Angelic hosts would witness the magnitude of the work that had been

done in the people, beholding the manifold wisdom of God confirmed in them (Eph 3:10).

Those who are quick to define the main purpose of the church rarely take into consideration its role in the tutelage of angelic hosts. It is an objective that is expressly stated in Scripture, so there is no justified reason for remaining

ignorant of it. *“And to make all men see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ: **to the intent** that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God”*(Eph 3:9-10). That very purpose is being lived out in our text.

## THEY WENT EVERYWHERE PREACHING THE WORD

**“ 4 Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word.”**

### THEREFORE

*“Therefore . . .”* Other versions read, *“Now,”*<sup>NRSV</sup> *“But,”*<sup>BBE</sup> *“However,”*<sup>CJB</sup> *“So,”*<sup>CSB</sup> *“and,”*<sup>MRD</sup> and *“then, indeed.”*<sup>YLT</sup>

Grammatically, this word means that what follows was the result of the preceding condition, which was a great persecution launched against the church. Spiritually it provides insight into how newness of life responds to opposition.

### THEY THAT WERE SCATTERED

*“ . . . they that were scattered*

signifies they were not fleeing for fear. These were noble souls, filled with faith, and living in the hope of glory.

### WENT EVERYWHERE PREACHING

*“ . . .went every where preaching the word.”* Other versions read, *“proclaiming the word,”*<sup>NRSV</sup> *“announced the good news,”*<sup>CJB</sup> *“proclaiming the message of good news,”*<sup>CSB</sup> *“announcing the glad tidings of the word,”*<sup>DARBY</sup> *“spread the word,”*<sup>GWN</sup> *“preached the good news about Jesus,”*<sup>NLT</sup> *“preaching the word of God,”*<sup>PNT</sup> *“proclaiming the good news – the word,”*<sup>YLT</sup> *“They told the people the good news,”*<sup>IE</sup> *“spreading the good news of God’s message,”*<sup>WEYMOUTH</sup>

*them is manifest to all them that dwell in Jerusalem; and we cannot deny it. **But that it spread no further among the people, let us straitly threaten them, that they speak henceforth to no man in this name”***(Acts 4:16-17).

However, their tactic did not work. Instead, the Land was filled all the more with the Gospel. At first they were only dealing with two witnesses – Peter and John (Acts 4:13). Then, after the opposition of the religious leaders, all of the apostles became more public and prominent (Acts 5:12-14). Now, they still have all of the apostles in Jerusalem, and all who were scattered throughout Judaea and Samaria also preaching the Word! Now, instead of Jerusalem being filled with the apostles’ doctrine (Acts 5:28), the whole land was being filled with it! You can see that the devil is fighting a losing battle. He cannot win, and Jesus cannot lose!

Persecution assumes that the ones being persecuted are basically self-centered. Just as Satan did with Job, it presumes *“Skin for skin, yea, all that a man hath will he give for his life”* (Job 2:4). The flesh cannot conceive of a person being willing to live for someone else – not loving their own lives, even unto the death. But that is precisely the kind of people that are produced by regeneration. They receive a new heart and a new spirit (Ezek 36:26). They become a new creation in Christ Jesus, with old things passing away and all things becoming new (2 Cor 5:17). They Are actually *“zealous of good works,”* persecuted or not (Tit 2:14). The law of

**The persecution was calculated to stop the spreading of the Gospel... However, their tactic did not work. Instead, the Land was filled all the more with the Gospel.**

*abroad . . .”* Other versions read, *“those who has been scattered,”*<sup>NASB</sup> *“those who had gone in flight,”*<sup>BBE</sup> *“they . . . that were dispersed,”*<sup>DOUAY</sup> and *“the believers who had fled Jerusalem.”*<sup>IE</sup>

Notice the inferior translations: i.e. *“Fled”* versus *“scattered.”* You can get God into *“scattered”* and *“dispersed,”* but it is more difficult to get Him into *“fled.”* The fact that these people were productive following their scattering

and *“went about [through the land from place to place] preaching the glad tidings, the Word [the doctrine concerning the attainment through Christ of salvation in the kingdom of God],”*<sup>AMPLIFIED</sup>

The persecution was calculated to stop the spreading of the Gospel. From the very first opposition raised against the believers, that was the aim. *“What shall we do to these men? for that indeed a notable miracle hath been done by*

God is written upon their hearts and put into their minds (Heb 8:10:16). God has shined into their hearts with the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, and they have been regenerated and refreshed by it (2 Cor 4:6). When you turn these people loose, they go everywhere preaching the word, proclaiming the good things they have heard and experienced.

#### WHAT IF THIS HAPPENED TODAY?

Keep in mind that the people in our text had heard the truth as it is in Jesus. Corrupt doctrine had not yet crept into the church, even though would not be long until it would. When it says they went everywhere *“preaching the word,”* it means they were speaking *“the truth of the Gospel”* (Gal 2:5,14; Col 1:5).

If the modern church was scattered today and went every preaching, I can hardly imagine what they would be saying. If the media ministries are an index to what is being preached – and it appears that this is generally true – all manner of distortions would be proclaimed. One group would be going everywhere preaching about the centrality of the home and marriage. Others would set up workshops to assist the people in dealing with various domestic and social problems. Still others would declare the Gospel of health and wealth for everyone. There would be those who declared the power of positive

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thinking, and how you can frame your future your own words. There would be a cluster of people declaring a Gospel of the Spirit, providing people with an easy routine that would guarantee the reception of the Spirit with attending signs. There would also be the church planters, praise and worship advocates, and those who marketed higher Christian education. Soul winning experts would be out there, together with financial advisers, and experts in child rearing and how reach various people groups. I am sure it would be much like the scattering of the people at Babel with no one understanding what the others were saying.

However, this whole scenario breaks down, because it is nothing more than an imagination. The truth of the matter is that persecution dries up such emphases, because they are totally lacking of Divine power. That is why men have to have routines, procedures, and rules to carry them out. There is no life in them. Such people have to be told to

spread their doctrine. The people in our text did not have to be told. The true Word burns in the hearts of men, the doctrines of men do not.

See, in this text we are witnessing the outworking of the real life of God. This is not simulated life, but is the real thing. This is how the life of Christ reacts in persecution. It has taught people to live for Christ, not for self. Thus, persecution does not have the power over them that it does to those whose conscience is defiled, and who are lacking in spiritual understanding.

What we have here is a parallel to Israel’s experience in Egypt. When persecution was experienced, the people started to multiply (Ex 1:7,12,20; Acts 7:17). Rest assured that what we receive in Christ Jesus is far superior to the best that Israel experienced. The covenant under which they operated was an inferior one. Its glory was a lesser and fading glory (2 Cor 3:7-10).

### CONCLUSION

The book of Acts is precisely that – a book of ACTS, activity, and action. It is a book in which the government of Jesus is seen, as He sits upon the throne of David, orchestrating the affairs of the world with the intent of bringing many sons to glory. It is a book in which the working of the Holy Spirit is seen, convicting, leading, directing,

illuminating, inspiring, and comforting. In it we behold how newness of life reacts in both peaceful and troubled environs, when the people are received, and when they are persecuted. We witness the impact of Christ’s intercession in heaven (Rom 8:34; Heb 7:25), and the intercession of the Holy Spirit from within the believers (Rom 8:26-27).

Wherever there is legitimate spiritual life, there will be similarities to what we are beholding in this book. If no such similarities are witnessed, we have good reason to question the presence of genuine spiritual life. In such a case, there must be a hearty and thorough examination of self to see if Christ is in us or not (2 Cor 13:5).

*Much, if not the majority, of the need for fleshly discipline and organization is refreshingly and effectively resolved when men live by faith and walk in the Spirit. Newness of life, and the hope it spawns, is actually a better disciplinarian than the accumulated wisdom of men.*

**Our next Hungry Saints Meeting will be held on Friday, 8/31/2007. We will continue our current series of lessons on the book of Acts. The Thirty-sixth lesson will cover verses 5 through 13 of the eighth chapter: "PHILIP PREACHES IN SAMARIA." The church in Jerusalem has been disrupted, but the work of the Lord progresses. Stephen, a vital part of that church, has been stoned. Now, another member of that early group of deacons, rises to prominence. He takes the Gospel of Christ to the city of Samaria. Our meeting will begin at 7:00 P.M. You are invited to bring your family and friends for fellowship around the Word of God. Refreshments are served afterward, with a time of extended fellowship for everyone.**

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**Pray for this ministry.**